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BABA YAGA AND THE MUSHROOMS

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Abstract: Nineteenth and early 20th century artists portray the Russian witch Baba Yaga with mushrooms, especially with *Amanita muscaria*, the fly agaric. Fairy tales about Baba Yaga, as well as other Slavic folktales, repeatedly contain passing reference to mushrooms, but mushrooms are not integral to story line in Baba Yaga tales. Written documentation for Baba Yaga extends only to late 17th–early 18th centuries, but philological studies and comparative folklore suggest her presence in folk belief considerably before then, plausibly originating from Baltic, Ugric and/or other non-Slavic sources. Linguistic and ethnographic analyses firmly link “baba” and “witch” to various mushrooms in Baltic and Slavic countries. In some tales, Baba Yaga is either the aunt or mother of a certain wizard, whose identity overlaps with another wizard equated with fly agaric. Baba Yaga is also strongly associated with water birds and bird-maidens (*rusalki*). Khanty myth references a water bird assisting creation of Earth from a red-capped mushroom. Baltic myth contains a “Mother of Mushrooms.” Pre-Slavic Balkan (Vinča) artifacts include figurines of bird-women, and mushrooms sculpted from rock crystal. Relationships of Balkan, Baltic, Ugric, and other mythic figures to Baba Yaga and to mushrooms are conjectured here and in other literature.

Key words: *Amanita*, baba, Baba Yaga, Balkan, Baltic, Bilibin, bird-maiden, fly agaric, Karazin, Khanty, mushroom, Polenova, Russian, Slavic, Ugric, Vasnetsov, Vinča, Zworykin



Introduction: early print sources, including illustrations

The witch Baba Yaga, a prominent character in Russian fairy tales, was first well documented in print in the 18th century. The “outstanding Russian poet, scientist, and grammarian” Mikhail Lomonosov referred to Baba Yaga in 1755 in notes in a Russian grammar. In 1780, Vasilii Levshin published a literary fairy tale containing reference to Baba Yaga, and in 1788 there was a comic opera by Dmitry Petrovich Gorchakov in which Baba Yaga appears with traditional attributes of hut on chicken legs, and mortar and pestle. Details of these and other instances from the late 1700s and early 1800s are summarized by Johns (2004). By 1820, an authentic folktale with Baba Yaga had been published, a version of type tale AT 327C/F (concerning a witch and children). The compiler, Mikhail Makarov, considered Baba Yaga to be “some kind of Slavic deity, known to us from folktales” (Johns, 2004). Early graphic portrayals of Baba Yaga indicate her attributes of association



Figure 1. Baba Yaga riding a pig, in a Russian *lubok* (a type of print); possibly a satire on Peter the Great and his wife, or alternatively, a contest between Baba Yaga and a shaman (Farrell 1993) ("early 17th century" in Wikipedia, citing Baldina Ol'ga Dmitrievna, *Russkie narodnye kartinki*. Moskva, Molodaya gvardiya, 1972). The figure is presented in monochrome by Johns (2004), who stated that it dates from late 17th or early 18th centuries. The object in Baba Yaga's raised hand is a pestle (Farrell, 1993).

with animals and the mortar and pestle (Figs. 1, 2).

Highly enigmatic, and of uncertain affiliation with Baba Yaga, is a putatively Slavic goddess, Tata (or Stata) Baba, 16th century (Fig. 3). According to Thevet (1575) her statue, worshipped as an idol by the Russians, represented a Pietà of some sort (hardly in character with Baba Yaga) and no doubt showing strong Christian influence. Thevet himself never visited Russia.

Also enigmatic is the relation of Baba Yaga to other ancient

Slavic deities. Wood (2015) aims some criticism at Forrester et al. (2013) and their sources for being "a little too ready to link Slavic figures such as the Kievan goddess Mokosh [a Mother Earth kind of deity]" to Baba Yaga. However, it seems completely appropriate to inform readers that Baba Yaga shares attributes with some of these deities, e.g., the Baltic Mother of Mushrooms (below), and a female deity analyzed in Propp's (1984) speculations on the Rig-Veda (below).

The famed Aleksandr Afanas'ev (1826-1871), Russia's foremost compiler of Russian folktales, assembled his collections in the early 1850s, most often from prior, unpublished collections. These tales are essentially the equivalent of those assembled by the Brothers Grimm for Germanic tales, and are still readily available in print in English, e.g., Afanas'ev (1945). By the early 1860s, these were appearing in translation in popular periodicals, and contained the familiar (often formulaic) components relevant to Baba Yaga: the hut on chicken legs, the invocation by the protagonist to the hut ("stand with your rear to the forest and your front to us"), Baba Yaga's expression of recognition ("now the flesh of a Russian ... I've smelt with nose and seen with sight"), Baba Yaga's daughters, and her mortar and pestle (Borrow, 1862).

The earliest illustrations I can locate explicitly associating Baba Yaga with mushrooms were painted by Nikolai Nikolaevich Karazin (1820-1908) in 1889 (Fig. 4) and, less explicitly, by Yelena Polenova (1850-1898) in about 1880 (Fig. 5). All the mushrooms are supernaturally large, and certainly appear to belong to *Amanita*. However, there are reasons, primarily philological but occasionally the contents of certain folktales, to believe that Baba Yaga's associations with mushrooms run much deeper.



Figure 2. From the early 19th century, Baba Yaga (pictured with a devil), is clearly portrayed with her mortar and pestle (Russian National Library). Kabakova (2016) provides multiple archival and literary sources for the figure, of which Fig. 2 is a detail.



Figure 3. Tata Baba, Muscovy region, by André Thevet, Paris (1575), *Cosmographie Universelle*. "Tata" usually connotes "father" in Slavic, but "stado" connotes "herd" or "flock;" and "baba" connotes an older woman.

Speculation and inference on the antiquity of Baba Yaga

It is not difficult to find conjectures, some more supported than others, on the purported great antiquity of Baba Yaga. The preeminent authority on structure of fairy tales (Märchen, wonder tales) Vladimir Propp (1895-1970), examined a hymn in the Rig-Veda (To the Lady of the Forest, Aranyāni). Although there is no mention of legs on her hut, the Lady is the Mother of Animals, has a house and/or wagon, and lives in the forest. "We readily recognize Baba Yaga and her hut" (Propp, 1984, posthumous trans.). Among formulaic components such as mentioned above, Propp (2012, posthumous trans.) adds the motif of Baba Yaga as gatekeeper to the boundaries and entrance to the other world. Her dialog with protagonists concerns entry to that world, and "reflects extremely ancient ideas" (Propp, 2012). Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994), widely known for her ideas on the origins of Indo-European peoples, considered Baba Yaga "the ancient Slavic goddess of death and regeneration" (Gimbutas, 1999, posthumous publ.). In her extended thesis on the great antiquity of certain folkways in Eastern Europe, Barber (2013) noted that some folklorists see in Baba Yaga an "ancestral helper along the maternal line." Folktales involving Baba Yaga are integral to Barber's (2013) thesis of folkways (dance, attire, stories) linking mythological female figures to agricultural and human fertility in remote antiquity. Johns (2004) documented the widespread occurrence of "baba" throughout Slavic countries, nearly always with the connotation of "old woman" and derived it from an Indo-European root **b(h)āb(h)-* (* denoting a reconstructed root, i.e., Proto-Indo-European, thus implying considerable antiquity). "The origin and meaning of *Iaga* is [sic] far more obscure" (Johns, 2004) and several possibilities are reviewed, including derivations from Baltic and proto-Slavic. Anthropomorphic



Figure 4. Baba Yaga by N.N. Karazin (1889) (Raven's Bread, <https://rabenbrot.wordpress.com/2013/11/28/slavic-mushrooms/>). The painting, sold at auction, is in a private collection. Note the *Amanita*-like mushroom (dots on cap) at lower right.



Figure 5. Masha and Vanya by Y. Polenova (~1880). Vanya was stolen, and had to be rescued from Baba Yaga by his sister Masha. An abundance of menacing fly agarics is conspicuous, but Baba Yaga is not pictured (<http://schwarzze.livejournal.com>).

stone stelae, some associated with Scythian or even earlier times, frequently possess pendant breasts, and are known by



Figure 6. Baba Yaga and the Bird Maidens by Ivan Bilibin (1902) (Wikimedia).

several appellations ending in "baba" (Shapiro, 1983).

Another putative link to antiquity is Baba Yaga's affiliation with birds. Her geese, for example, steal children for her (Afanas'ev no. 113, *The Geese and Swans*), as does the Grey Eagle (Khudiakov no. 53, *The Brother*) (Forrester et al., 2013). Folktales connecting Baba Yaga with bird maidens were captured by Ivan Bilibin (1876-1942) in a water color (Fig. 6). Such bird maidens were associated with folktales about Baba Yaga and the Firebird (Hubbs, 1988). In Russian folklore, bird maidens are sometimes *rusalki*, having features of archaic goddesses (half female human, half fish, half serpent, etc.) and often displaying malevolent habits. Hubbs (1988) and Barber (2013) considered them very ancient. "They ... echo the hybrid goddesses of Tripol'e [Ukrainian Neolithic]" (Hubbs, 1988). Cheek (2013) stated that "Ježibaba/Baba Yaga" is a more recent phenomenon than *rusalki*, "coming into her own in Slavic tales and Czech tales ... in the 19th century," but as we've seen, Baba Yaga is already well documented in the 18th century. Shapiro (1983) has a view similar to that of Hubbs (1988), and both Shapiro and Johns (2004) note connections of Baba Yaga with serpents as well as with birds. This line of thought is pursued, albeit in an almost chain-of-consciousness fashion, by Richards (2004), where Baba Yaga is linked via a series of motifs combining bird heads atop elongated necks or torsos,

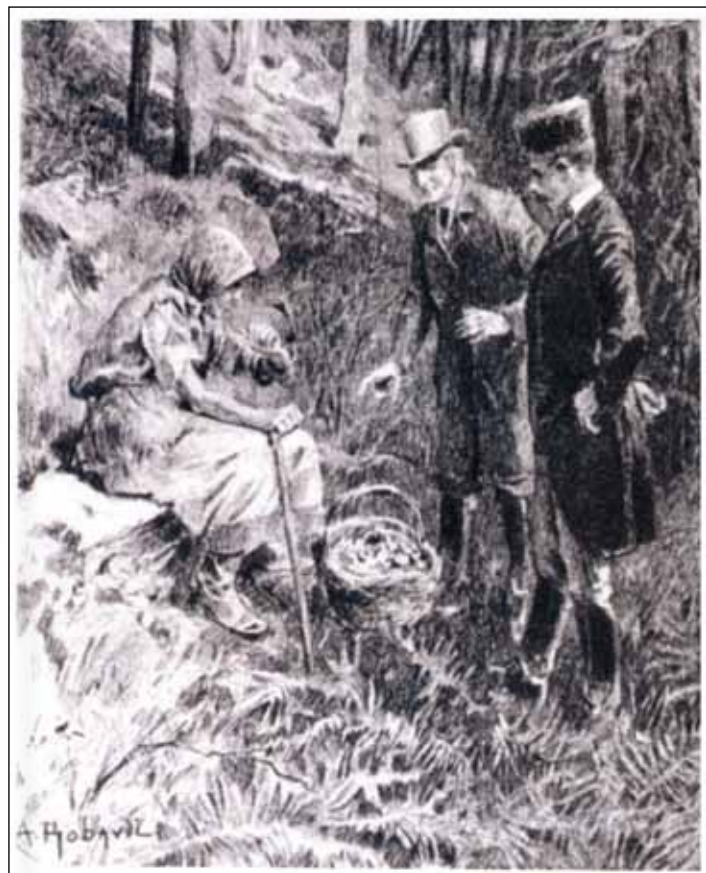


Figure 7. The witch in Mérimée (1905), an English translation from the French of 1869. A pagan Slavic god is invoked; a snake conjured from a basket of mushrooms coils around the witch's left arm. Artist: A. Robaudi.

to artifacts in the Vinča culture (Transylvania, ca. 5000 BC) (Richards, 2004). It should be added that mushrooms sculpted from rock crystal were recovered in archaeological context from a Vinča site (Gimbutas, 1982). Caveats are essential here, chiefly that it is unproven whether the Vinča culture was, unlike the Slavic, Indo- or even Proto-Indo-European (although it may have had pertinent influence on Proto-Slavic peoples), and there is no way of knowing at present how the mushroom iconography may have been related to the Vinča bird motifs. See however, the connection between water birds and a mushroom at the origin of the world in Baltic myth, below.

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Philological, textual and ethnographic evidence on mushrooms

Most pertinent to linking “baba” (“old woman” – “grandmother” – “midwife” – “witch” – or even “dead female ancestor” – etc.) with “mushroom” is the summary of Stankiewicz (1958). “Baba” may even connote a specific kind of “mushroom,” e.g., *Boletus edulis* (an eminently edible species) in Polish *babka* (Stankiewicz, 1958). In Slovak, *ježibaba* is the equivalent of Russian *Baba jaga* (*yaga, iaga*) (Stankiewicz, 1958). Johns (2004) also reviews multiple interpretations of “baba” and “iaga” and notes the connection to “certain kinds of mushroom.” “Baba” in Polish has roughly the same connotations as above in the review of Ostling (2011), who provided an illustration of a baba from ~1685 in which a witchy baba holds a broomstick, and an instance from a witchcraft trial of mushroom powder used to bewitch crops. In 1671, a woman was accused of trying to poison the Tsar's wife with a mushroom, and tortured on suspicion of magic; possession of herbs (a mushroom in this case) was a frequent attribute of those accused of being a witch (“female magician ... midwife ... *baba*”) (Ryan, 1998). Dugan (2008a; 2008b; 2011) reviewed ethnographic evidence connecting mushrooms with witches and women, particularly older women, in Europe, especially Slavic and Baltic countries.

This connection may be responsible for elements in Edgeworth (1869), a work of fiction wherein two gentlemen traveling in Lithuania are accosted by an elderly “sorceress” and “witch,” who conjures a serpent from a basket of mushrooms while invoking the name of a putatively ancient Slavic deity. Edgeworth (1869) was an abridgement of a work of the same date by Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870), but the story was not fully translated from French into English until Mérimée (1905), with an illustration of the witch, her mushrooms and the serpent (Fig. 7). Whether this episode reflects genuine folklore or is more appropriately treated as “fakelore” is conjectural. Elements of purported Slavic paganism were here being combined in popular literature with mushrooms, serpents and witchcraft, although Baba Yaga was not directly referenced. One mushroom in the witch's basket elicited comment from the gentlemen, but it was *Agaricus necator* (*Lactarius necator*, considered inedible in western countries but preserved in salt in Eastern Europe), not an *Amanita*. That Slavic peoples consumed fungi avoided by peoples to the west was the opinion of Lyall (1823), who provided an extensive synopsis on mycophagy in Russia of the early 19th century and earlier. Lyall (1823) made no reference to witches with regard to mushrooms, but noted the special role of Russian women in collecting fungi.

The general semiotic significance of mushrooms in myth was reviewed by Toporov (1985), with occasional reference to usages linking mushrooms to thunder and/or lightning and deities personifying them, e.g., Perun the Slavic god of thunder. Johns (2004) reviewed, somewhat skeptically, previous opinion linking Baba Yaga to storm clouds. More prosaically, a Russian forest spirit (and sometimes associate of Baba Yaga), the *leshii*, would assume the likeness of a mushroom or alter the appearance of mushrooms with a whip; in the north, such spirits were associated with storm winds (Ivanits, 1989). According to Detelić (1998), the Slovenes had a ritual of rolling



Figure 8. Baba Yaga by Ivan Bilibin (1902), with fly agarics in foreground (Wikimedia). Bilibin and Zworykin (Fig. 9) were influenced by Yelena Polenova's illustrations of mushrooms (see Dugan, 2016).

on the ground at “first thunder” (of the season?) to promote an abundant harvest of white mushrooms. The first mushrooms found during a mushroom harvest (“first fruits”) might be offered as a sacrifice to a forest spirit, albeit with addition of Christian prayer (Wenska, 2015). Notably, the spirit was identified with Veles, a chthonic and aquatic deity distinct from Perun (Wenska, 2015).

Mushrooms were a component of Baltic and Ugric religion. There was a “Mother of Mushrooms” (*Sēņu māte*) in Baltic religion. Opinions are divided on whether such “mothers” or goddesses in Baltic religion indicate influence of the Christian Virgin Mary (Ankrava, 2013; Biezais and Ankrava, 2005). There is a reference to Earth originating as a “red-cropped” [sic – “red-capped”?] mushroom in myths of the Khanty, an indigenous Ugric people, near Ob River, Russia. This origin, subsequent to the Deluge, was wrought by a bird, Luli (a small loon) (Deviatkina, 2011), although there are different versions, less specific about the bird (“water bird” or “diving bird” or specifying other birds like sandpiper, swan or grebe) and omitting the mushroom (Deviatkina, 2011; Limerov, 2005).

Hubbs (1988) related a folksong, a stanza of which goes, “Where old women go mushrooms grow, Oi Liuli [Lada].” Lada is a name commonly occurring in planting or harvest songs in Russia, and “has been linked to a Latvian goddess, as well as to the Golden *baba* of the Ugrians” (Hubbs, 1988,

with commentary on various possible origins for Lada). "Lada" is also linked to other "baba" names, or more specifically to a close analog "Boda" in a Polish document of about 1550 (Marjanić, 2003, with commentary on the antiquity of "baba" names for ancient Serbian and Croatian female deities). Baba Yaga is not explicitly linked to the Golden Baba, but Johns (2004) noted the possibility of a non-Russian (and probably northern) origin for Baba Yaga, based on the formulaic nature of her response to a Russian visitor, i.e., her statement that she smells a Russian, and that it has been a long time since a Russian has come to her. Johns (2004) lists water birds (including pelicans, swans, etc.) associated with Baba Yaga. Goscilo (2013) noted that the legs on Baba Yaga's hut are congruent with the "legs" formed by bases of trees used as platforms for storage huts by indigenous peoples of the Russian north. Hatto (2017) has an analogous opinion on the resemblance of the Khanty "Idol-Hut" to Baba Yaga's dwelling, and describes several Khanty practices involving fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*). So it is plausible, but scarcely certain, that the Slavic Baba Yaga was derived from Baltic and/or Ugric mythologies, whose female divinities had connections to mushrooms and birds. According to famed founder of ethnomycology R. Gordon Wasson (1898-1986), the wise women (*javas asszony*) of Hungarian tradition used fly agaric for love philtres (Wasson, 1968). Hungarian (Magyar) is a branch of Ugric, this relation explaining why the use of fly agaric, documented in Ugric lore, persisted in Hungarian folkways (Czigány, 1980). Outside these traditions, it is

recorded that Swedish witches of the 17th century made salves of mushrooms ("*röd flugsvamp-amanita muscaria*") and stored them in horns, also used for storing salves of hemp, opium and henbane (Jordon, 2012, citing a source in Swedish).

However, individual folktales in which Baba Yaga herself has direct and explicit connections with mushrooms are hard to find. Goscilo (2013) stated that mushrooms are "never mentioned in Russian fairy tales," but this is an exaggeration. It certainly does not apply to all Russian folktales, e.g., *The War of The Mushrooms*, a well-known folk poem (Dugan, 2016), but not directly pertinent to Baba Yaga. In Russian fairy tales *per se*, (Märchen, wonder tales), mushrooms appear, but usually incidentally, e.g., "One day the man went into the woods to get mushrooms" (Baba Yaga and the Runt, Afanas'ev no. 105, in Forrester et al. 2013). Similarly, in *Ivanko the Bear's Son* (Afanas'ev, 1945), "One day the wife went to the forest for mushrooms ..." This usage, in a culture in which mushroom hunting is a common pastime, is equivalent to saying, "Once upon a time." In another Afanas'ev collection (Haney, 2014) we likewise have a tale with Baba Yaga's daughters (AT 301, involving stolen princesses), in which characters search for berries or mushrooms. These instances use mushroom hunting to situate the tale, but mushrooms themselves are not integral to the plot. Mushrooms comprise part of a story line in *The Fool and the Birch Tree* (Afanas'ev v., no. 53, Ralston 1880), where the clever brothers lie to an avaricious cleric that they have no money, only mushrooms, but the foolish brother speaks the truth; a series of events ensue, but none pertinent

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to Baba Yaga. Mushrooms are also integral to plot in *The Milk of the Beasts* (Afanas'ev 203) wherein the fool (our hero) collects mushrooms, and then discovers the hideout of the robbers. He defeats them, and fills his mushroom basket with their gold, which he gives to his sister (Haney, 2015), but again Baba Yaga is not involved.

Very intriguingly, in some Russian tales there is a villainous wizard, Mukhomor, sometimes equated with the equally bad Koshchei the Deathless (*The Enchanted Tsardom*, in Haney, 2013). Mukhomor "means 'Poison Mushroom' (Fly-agaric)" (Haney, 2013), and indeed the "moucho-more, a deleterious species of mushroom" was early recorded as comprising "entertainments" of Siberian tribesmen (Von Kotzebue, 1830), an obvious allusion to use of fly agaric for intoxication (e.g., Wasson, 1968). Koshchei and Baba Yaga can appear in the same tale. Baba Yaga is either his aunt or his mother (Shapiro, 1983), and the association between Koshchei, Baba Yaga and fly agarics persists in contemporary Russian grade school games (Yamin-Pasternak, personal communication). I have not seen the name "Mukhomor" directly linked to Baba Yaga in older folktales. But in some contemporary Russian tales and theater productions, there occurs the name "Mukhomorovna" or "Yaga Mukhomorovna," e.g., Baba Yaga's patronymic, "daughter of Mukhomor" (Yamin-Pasternak, personal communication). A distinguished scholar of Russian literature and folklore, W.R.S. Ralston (1828-1889), provided summaries of the relation between Baba Yaga, Koshchei and their roles in Russian and Slavonic folklore, often with reference to the perspectives of Afanas'ev (Ralston, 1872).

Soidla and Shapiro (1997) cited Propp (1986, posthumous, in Russian, pp. 66-67) for Baba Yaga treating visitors to "magical foods or drinks intended for the dead and not for the living." The authors go on to state, "Of the magical foods, mushrooms seem to be most common, and some Baba-Yaga tales contain references to mushrooms in several contexts. Illustrations for these tales (although certainly done much later than the tales themselves) often depict Baba-Yaga surrounded by red fly agaric and other mushrooms." It is unclear on the basis of Soidla and Shapiro (1997) if the use of mushrooms in this manner, e.g., as a magical food, is contained in Propp (1986) or is an inference by the authors.¹ Their primary example of mushrooms in a fairy tale consists of "Baba Yaga sets off into the woods to gather mushrooms and parsley for the stew and finds a hedgehog sitting on top of a big mushroom and eating a mushroom." The hedgehog becomes a boy who is the protagonist of the tale. This tale is unsurprisingly mentioned in works devoted to mushrooms, e.g., Marley (2010), citing Vilenskaya (n.d.).² The theme of mushrooms as magical foods dispensed by Baba Yaga is also addressed by Ivanova (2013), but specific citations for this occurrence are not provided so it is unclear whether or not this use of mushrooms is Ivanova's inference. Propp (1968) mentions specific examples of food or beverages acting as magic agents, but mushrooms are not specified.

Multiple illustrations by Bilibin for folktales involving Baba Yaga included mushrooms, especially fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) (Fig. 8). Similar illustrations, numerous and widely known, were produced by contemporaries, e.g. Boris Zworykin (1872-1942, Fig. 9).³ Over decades, inclusion of fly agaric in illustrations of Baba Yaga tales became standard, such as those by Peter Koshkin for Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Beautiful (pp



Figure 9. Boris Zworykin's Baba Yaga (1917, in V.A. Smirnov, *The Witch and the Strawberries*) with fly agaric in lower left. Zworykin has been called "the shadow that followed Bilibin" (forum.artinvestment.ru) but their works were largely contemporaneous.

90-91, in Warner, 1985).

That the fly agaric was pictorially inserted into Baba Yaga tales well prior to the more recent enthusiasm of mycophiles for Wasson's (1968) thesis on soma is demonstrated not only by Bilibin's artwork and that of contemporaries, e.g., Zworykin and Viktor Vasnetsov, 1848-1926 (Fig. 10), but is suggested by the *Amanita*-like mushroom in Karazin (1889). Prior to Karazin (1889), Yelena Polenova painted "Masha and Vanya" (~1880) with fly agarics (<http://schwarzze.livejournal.com/248633.html>). In this tale (number 113 in the Afanas'ev collections), Baba Yaga's swan-geese capture Vanya, who must be rescued by his sister, but in the painting itself (Fig. 5) only the siblings are shown. Unsurprisingly, Wasson enthusiasts (see *In Wasson's footsteps (sort of)*, Dugan, 2011) have suggested

1 Taras Nazarov and Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, both fluent in Russian, read pages 66-67 of the 1986 edition and confirmed this result: mushrooms are not mentioned by Propp (1986) on these pages.

2 Vilenskaya (n.d.) cited Small (1966), as did Ruck et al. (2007) for this story of a hedgehog and mushrooms. Her phrasing, seemingly straight from Small (1966), is word-for-word the same as that of Soidla and Shapiro (1997). Small's (1966) tale was "drawn together into one story" from "such sources as" (Small lists several 20th century fairy tale compilations). Small (1966) is an engaging tale written for children, but of indefinite (or mixed) provenance.

3 Bilibin was in Germany in 1898 and 1900, where other artists portrayed witches with mushrooms. Heinrich Vogeler's *Die Hexe mit Eule* (1895) includes *Amanita* mushrooms. Alexander Zick (1845-1907) portrayed the witch in *Hänsel et Gretel avec la sorcière* (date unknown) with red-capped mushrooms. German artists Paul Meyerheim (1843-1915) and Hermann Vogel (1856-1918) showed mushrooms with witches or other fairy tale characters in the 1890s. In England, Edgar Bundy's *A Witch* (1896) contained fly agarics. H.J. Ford's *The Witch-Maiden* (Yellow Fairy Book, 1894) has a fly agaric. Such examples could be multiplied and after 1900 were abundant.



that *A. muscaria* be added to Baba Yaga's accoutrements, e.g., Dunn (1973).

Items manufactured in the Russian folk tradition (or at least imitating that tradition) very frequently include images

Figure 10. Baba Yaga, by Viktor Vasnetsov (1917, Wikimedia), emphasizing Baba Yaga's reputation of kidnapping children for her dinner. Inconspicuous fly agarics are visible in the lower left corner (arrow, and insert).



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Figure 11. Modern lacquer boxes, simulating Russian folk art on Baba Yaga and advertised online, frequently feature fly agarics (arrows). The box showing Baba Yaga dropping an *Amanita* into a cauldron (top middle), is captioned by Goscilo (2013) as demonstrating "the Russian handicraft industry's profit-driven catering to Western traditions and tastes."

of Baba Yaga in association with the fly agaric. Lacquer boxes in particular (Fig. 11) can be readily located in online images, often on [pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com) or other sites, and usually feature the hut on chicken legs, Baba Yaga, and a mortar (but sometimes with a broomstick substituted for the pestle and with Westernized accoutrements, e.g., black cats, cauldrons, etc.). Google Shopping offers an assortment of Russian lacquer ware on which Baba Yaga and fly agaric mushrooms are often conspicuous. Baba Yaga items comprising stained glass, coasters, lacquer, tapestries and other items on [etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com) also include *Amanita* motifs. Bilibin prints, many predictably including little red-capped mushrooms with white dots, are offered on [ebay.com](https://www.ebay.com). Fly agarics ornament Baba Yaga books and dolls offered by [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). From [zazzle.com](https://www.zazzle.com) you can get your Vasilisa the Beautiful coffee mug, and other mugs with similar Baba Yaga themes, with or without fly agarics.

Discussion and conclusions

Philological and ethnographic evidence strongly supports the notion that Baba Yaga has been present in Russian folk tradition much longer than written documentation alone attests. Persons well acquainted with this tradition repeatedly use the word "ancient" but usually without quantification. It is

probably safe to infer that Baba Yaga was already established in folklore during medieval times. If Propp (1984) was correct, we might even surmise that the Lady of the Forest and Baba Yaga had a common origin in distant Indo-European or even Proto-Indo-European times. However, in another comparison (that of the princess Elena the Wise with the ancient Greek Demeter), Propp (1984) was careful to note, "Even though we compare Demeter and the princess, it does not mean our princess is a direct descendent of Demeter. It only means that features of the goddess of agriculture are characteristic of the princess." This cautious attitude might equally apply to the brilliantly intuitive but highly speculative work of Barber (2013). Motifs may be shuffled between tales, and tales between cultures, and as Propp (1968) emphasized, different folk characters may be exchanged between tales, and the same function within tales might be fulfilled by different characters.

Mushrooms have played a prominent role in Russian cultural life, seemingly for centuries. They are so embedded, that to say a given character went to gather mushrooms is a standard introductory motif for a folktale, including some tales about Baba Yaga. In Russian fairy tales, it is therefore not surprising that mushrooms are occasionally in the background and have become a standard fixture of Russian fairy tale illustration. It seems they are usually more emblematic of setting than of function or plot ("morphology" *sensu* Propp, 1968). But there are hints at deeper roles: "Mother of Mushrooms" in Baltic lore and a plausible connection of the Ugric "Golden *baba*" with mushrooms; the fairy tale wizard named "Poison Mushroom;" and philological connections between "baba" and mushrooms. One wonders where Karazin made the connection between

Baba Yaga and *Amanita*, as the giant *Amanita*-like mushroom in Karazin (1889) was painted when Bilibin was only thirteen. Were Karazin, Zworykin, Bilibin and their contemporaries drawing from a shared folk tradition, or merely echoing prior artistic approaches, e.g., Polenova? Antedating Polenova's painting, Modest Mussorgsky's composition, *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874) incorporated a theme, "The Hut on Chicken Legs" after a painting by Mussorgsky's friend, the painter Victor Hartmann (1834-1873). Hartmann himself once shocked his contemporaries by going to a costume ball dressed as Baba Yaga (www.stmoroky.com). Mussorgsky's "Gathering Mushrooms" (1867) has lyrics in which the woman collecting these fungi considers using them as poison on her husband. These established facts do *not* indicate that either Mussorgsky or Hartmann directly connected Baba Yaga with mushrooms, but the possibility is implied. It may be mere coincidence (or not) that the conductor Sir Henry Wood (1869-1944) later added mushroom bells (mushroom-shaped percussive

instruments) to the orchestration for "The Hut on Chicken Legs" (www.musicweb-international.com).

Especially intriguing is the possibility that Baba Yaga and her hut are derived in part from ancient Baltic and Ugric beliefs, including the myth of a red-capped mushroom and water birds. Going even farther back in time, were the enigmatic Vinča mushroom sculptures in any way related to the Vinča bird-women figurines, and did these remote motifs foreshadow folk concepts of Baba Yaga?

These tantalizing conjectures entice us to explore the depths underlying contemporary fairy tale convention and ornament. Some persons who have delved into the impacts of *Amanita* on folk belief have made startling (specious?) claims, including that cultic beliefs about *Amanita muscaria* underpin Mediterranean and European history (e.g., Allegro, 1970; Ruck et al., 2011). Others claim to have unlocked the keys to eternity by channeling conversations with ancient Egyptian *Amanita*-users (Puharich, 1959, with cameo appearances by



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Aldous Huxley and Gordon Wasson). With more restricted ambition, we might try unlocking the shamanic roots of European fairy tales, for which Ruck et al. (2007) made valiant efforts, but pertaining to Baba Yaga (and in spite of a wonderful picture of her on the jacket, with fly agarics!), they uncovered little not addressed here.⁴ Ruck et al. (2007; 2011) followed other scholars (Allegro, 1970; Wasson, 1968; and many others, less well-known) in surmising that the fly agaric had foundational impacts on world history, myth and religion, and in constructing their own highly detailed account. Readers are encouraged to explore such accounts, but urged to keep their skepticism intact.

Proceeding with caution, we might remind ourselves that written source materials on Baba Yaga date only from late 17th–early 18th century, and I have found pictorial sources relating Baba Yaga to mushrooms only from late 19th century onwards. Openly practiced paganism existed in Eastern Europe well into the 10th century, and Baltic, Finno-Ugric and Prussian paganism was suppressed by the Teutonic Knights only in the 13th century (Barford, 2001), but written sources from those times describing pagan folklore are virtually non-existent. Pagan lore usually must be inferred from Church documents hostile to pagan belief (Filotas, 2005). Although there is a literature on pagan influences on festivals, holidays and the like, most derives from Western Europe (e.g., Dugan, 2015), and gleanings on Baba Yaga and Eastern European shamanism are slim (Johns, 2004). But that pre-Christian beliefs long lingered below the surface was evident to persons familiar with Pre-Revolutionary Russia: "The old pagan religion, too, is a secret institution ... the wood-sprites have their abode; whilst the lakes, rivers, and waterfalls abound in water-sprites, of whom the Roosalka are the most dangerous ... The cult of the wood-sprite obtains mostly in the forest region ... whilst the water cult (the worship of water-sprites) prevails among the thousands of fishermen, raftsmen, boatmen, and sailors of the mighty rivers and lakes" (Steveni, 1913). A pagan storm deity was by then "the Tsar of the winds, who ... is also very common" (Steveni, 1913). After providing concise accounts of several offerings and sacrifices to the various sprites by both Russians and Finnish tribes along the upper Volga, Steveni (who spent more than 10 years in Russia), mentions the "wise woman" in northern Russian villages, "who effects cures by spells and incantations and the use of

4 Ruck et al. (2007) cite Propp (1986) in support of their statement on Baba Yaga and "the gateway to another world ... through purveyance of magical food and drink, most often mushrooms, commonly depicted, at least in late illustrations, as fly agarics" (emphasis added). As indicated in footnote 1, I can find no evidence that Propp (1986) actually mentioned mushrooms in this regard. In their footnote 5, referencing Propp (1986), Ruck et al. (2007) also cite Vilenskaya (n.d.), who like Soidla and Shapiro (1997), specifically referred to Propp (1986, pp. 66-67) in support of mushrooms being magical food. Ivanova (2013) wrote that mushrooms were "supposedly" the food leading to the other world, but directly cited no specific source. One might tentatively conclude that this persistent citing of Propp (1986, pp 66-67), who did not actually specify mushrooms on those pages, and of Small (1966), whose tale of Baba Yaga, a hedgehog and mushrooms was a late synthesis (see footnote 2), have lent too much credence to the idea that Baba Yaga was intimately connected with mushrooms in authentic, transcribed folktales. Whether or not she was associated with mushrooms in other folkways, including with the wizard Mukhomor (fly agaric) is a different matter.

herbs." Here we are not so far from the world of Baba Yaga. But although belief in witches is specified, Baba Yaga herself is not mentioned and mushrooms are only referenced as a common food in Steveni (1913). Use of herbs and roots, as well as potions and incantations, were frequently mentioned in Russian witchcraft trials of earlier times (Zguta, 1977). References to fly agaric in Jordon (2012), pertaining to Swedish witches, and in Czigány (1980), pertaining to "wise women" in Hungary, are especially engaging, as they relate use of fly agaric in the traditions of northern and central Europe, respectively, as opposed to the shamanic traditions of Siberia. Is the presence of the wizard Mukhomor ("Fly-agaric") in Russian fairy tales an indication of a bridge between Siberian and west/central European traditions? Might Baba Yaga also be found on this bridge?

At present, rather than create our own mythologies, it is best to admit the paucity of sources and the limits of reasonable conjecture. The Baba Yaga of fairy tales is likely the result of anastomosis between numerous strands, some glimpsed by us only faintly and fleetingly. It seems unlikely that any single strand comprised a "true" Baba Yaga of remote antiquity, but each may have contributed to her eventual identity, including her association with mushrooms.

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Up Bear Creek

How many times have I
made the long climb
up the Bear Creek Canyon

into the wild heart of
what keeps Telluride
connected & alive?

How often alone
with the stone souls of
soaring cliffs?

Steep slopes of fir?
Blue spruce & rushing stream?
The sharp scent of arnica? Oshá?

How many times? Fallen.
Down on my knees.
Preying. On wild strawberries.

Sometimes leading my kids on
daring a wild mushroom chase
& then finding them.

Boletes the size of beefsteaks
& crowds of shaggymaned Coprinus.
Emergent buttons & full fleshed caps.

All those times leading
coiffed & collared wedding parties
or bands of dancing crazies
up to the great falls
to celebrate & sing
& make music.

I remember the time I
packed my stepson up the goat track
to the crystaled scree of La Junta Basin

drinking the summer drip of
glacial melt to the shriek
& chatter of pika & marmot.

Especially I remember the times
Dolores La Chapelle led us on
a hike to the lower falls

at the Idarado tailings toe
to chant & be charmed
by mind-altering ions.

Or the times we walked the silence
all the way up stepping barefoot to the drum.

Sitting crosslegged in the meadows
to share heartsongs & sighs.
Our minds whirling dervish dieties.

One year the Rainbow Family
held a regional up there. Buses
slipped beside the creek. Full moon.

A hundred of them. Circled hands.
Campsmoke. Dumbeks & pagan
chants echoing off the cliffs.

Truth is, there's no sense
in keeping count. Been there.
Done that. Want to do it again?

What makes this place, this headwaters
high Rockies canyon cathedral,
special

is the practice we make of
honoring it Yes! As open space. As town park.

As our own deepest rootested
bitterleafed lily shrine of shivering
quakies. As rusted millsite glory hole

dreams worn into debris. As spirit tales.
As avalanche chute fall lines, illegal & alluring.
& as the very rock around us.

A path we walk, ride & slide.
Rooted. Renewed
& re-enchanted

Art Goodtimes